

More avant garde

One of the first acts in cultural analysis is setting up the terms of what will be studied. This is inevitably an inductive/deductive process in which the researcher starts with a broad intuitive sense of what needs to be defined and then tries to set up terms, boundaries, limits so that the work can move forward. But in the process, boundaries may change and definitions may need to be changed. The very definition of the field shapes what kinds of questions can be raised. The downside is that the work being done can simply be circular, and finally banal. The upside is that new ideas may come forward, and thus genuinely new knowledge can be generated.

Avant garde
Experimental
Underground
New American Cinema
Independent
Sundance

My specific concern is the field of experimental film and video. What do we mean by “experimental”? That varies a bit with different historians and critics and artists having slightly different views,

When I first arrived at the Radio/Television/Film department at Northwestern, there was a common operating definition that films could be divided into three “modes”: dramatic narratives, documentaries, and experimental.

Fred camper definition

New York’s Cinema 16, founded in the postwar era as a showcase and forum for independent film, organized in 1953 a symposium on “Poetry and the Film” that offered the first real public debate on the theory behind what was then considered experimental film. significantly, the first record of the avant garde film project is an aesthetic statement which addresses itself to political concerns largely in terms of stating its antagonistic relation to the Hollywood money men. The symposium centered on Maya Deren’s presentation of the “horizontal” (i.e., dramatic, narrative) elements of cinema in relation to its “vertical” (i.e., poetic, nonnarrative) potential, using as an explanatory example the value of the soliloquies in Shakespeare’s plays, prized for their poetry although they often seem tangential to the plays’ dramatic development or conclusion. Deren was a

notable figure in the avant garde at this time, not only for her films, but for her ceaseless prosthetizing. determined to close the gap between the avant garde filmmaker and the public, and taking audience ignorance as cause for communication, not condemnation, she continually explicated her work and aims. similarly democratic impulses inspired Jonas Mekas and Vogel to build an institutional base for independent filmmaking: distribution and exhibition (Vogel's Cinema 16) and criticism (Mekas' Film culture). This base helped to break down the isolation of the individual artist, to validate a cultural alternative to the dominant commercial cinema, to foster the imagining of other possibilities, and to provide the communication and resources that would allow a new cinema to come into being. Both Mekas and Vogel were eclectic in their taste and generous in their support. Vogel held to the position that, "in the last analysis, every work of art, to the extent that it is original and breaks with the past instead of repeating it, is subversive."¹ The implicit limits of this position were pointed out later by critic Parker Tyler (also a symposium participant). Tracing the relationship of Beat culture to the anti-establishment thinking of underground filmmakers, his 1969 comment has the clarity of hindsight:

Curiously enough, the Underground Film movement,...can be identified as having traits of both Anarchist and Communist philosophy. The catch is that...the movement has taken specifically formal virtues as the object of destruction, and has done so not autocratically, by rigidly excluding those virtues, but by using its universal-tolerance code.²

The development of this universal tolerance code could be seen in 1960 when a different meeting took place. The convening of the New American Cinema group, an uneasy alliance of the political and the poetic, produced a founding statement with anti-capitalist tendencies. The 25 member group called for new methods of financing independent films, praised personal expression, condemned censorship, placed itself in opposition to the current distribution-exhibition policies which it thought high time to "blow up." And mandated Emile de Antonio to set up a distribution cooperative. A new stage had been reached in the New American Cinema. The eclectic spirit succeeded in opening up the ranks of the avant garde to a broad range of cinematic strategies, as the first four Film Culture annual awards confirm. they were given to low-budget fictional narration (*Shadows*, d. John Cassavetes) in 1959, to the wacky off-Beat *Pull My Daisy* (Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank) in 1960, the cinema-verite approach of *Primary* (Richard Leacock, Donn Pennebaker, Robert Drew, and Albert Maysles) in 1961, and the poetic cinema of Stan Brakhage's *The Dead* and *Prehude* in 1962. The parameters of the New American Cinema had expanded, both politically and aesthetically, but had done so very much along its earlier lines of definition: against the

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domination of the film industry, they stood for artisan production. Attitudes suited to Eisenhower's Cold War were slightly updated to the optimistic liberalism of the Kennedy years.

The positions assumed by Jonas Mekas during this period provide a representative index of the times. In the 50's Mekas had continued the politics of the heart which he used in the Resistance against Nazi occupation of his native Lithuania during World War 2. His early New York diary films chronicle his pacifist participation in Ban the Bomb demonstrations. By 1964 he had made *The Brig*, a documentary style filming of the Living Theatre's production of Kenneth Brown's play about military brutality. There was always a strong current of romanticism motivating such anti-establishment politics (in the US a line stretching from Henry David Thoreau to Timothy Leary). For Mekas, as for many artists, this tendency easily metamorphosed into a creed of cultivating one's own garden, an individualism implicit all along in the Age of Aquarius. Indeed, by 1966 Mekas could write,

We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that. Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we have to improve ourselves; that only through the beauty of our own selves can we beautify the others.³

(ref also John Lennon

This evolution along the lines of individualistic tolerance can also be traced in terms of Mekas' position on homosexuality. In 1955 Mekas wrote a controversial essay on US experimental film (since repudiated by the author) that centered its attack on the "adolescent character" of the films and the "conspiracy of homosexuality" among their makers. In retrospect, Mekas was rather on-target in his assessment of those films' heroes: "ouch with reality seems to be very feeble. Instead of a human being, we find a poetic version of a modern zombie."⁴ Mekas faulted these films' symbolist/surrealist unreality, the characters' Dostoevskian inner absorption, the entire work's distance from the concrete world in which people live. In other words, Mekas criticized one dominant tradition of the romantic artist, in this instance ethereal, idealist truth-seeking. He furthermore faulted the work for its homosexual "perversion" and "unmotivated" art of "abnormality."

Nine years later, however, he switched sides, opting for the journey not to the heights, but into the depths, praising such films as Ken Jacobs' and Bob Fleischner's *Blond Cobra* and Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief*. Mekas claimed that these films, and others of their genre, raised the supreme

challenge to ossified bourgeois culture and morality via their homosexual subject matter and/or deliberately crude style. He brought Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, a classic of polymorphous eroticism, to the Knokke-Heist experimental film festival in 1963, where he championed its beauty against the censorship of Belgian officials (although he referred disparagingly to "the fags who were swamping the fest" and bothering his friend Paul Adams Sitney).⁵ Mekas held apparently opposing views in fragile equilibrium, bound together only by the notion of the artist standing above society with his vision as a challenge to it.

The early gay films of the 50s and 60s, both disparaged and praised by Mekas, can be seen in another light. In the dark years between the McCarthy-style derailment of the first US lesbian and gay movement and its renaissance after Stonewall in 1969, these films, together with their literary analogue, the Beat movement, constituted the only visible glimmer of the pervasive gay subculture testified to by Kinsey, and the only hints of the movement that was to follow in the 70s. This visibility alone was a kind of militancy in the context of the period. Likewise, the commitment of Amos Vogel and others (*Grove Press*, *Lenny Bruce*, *Evergreen Review*, even *Playboy*) to the breaking of sexual taboos was progressive within the struggle against Puritanism, censorship, and threats to free speech. It was a period of contradictions, with court cases and jailings, the birth control pill and sexual liberation. In Chicago, for example, the center *Cinema Co-op* grew out of the *Aardvark Theater*, which showed a mix of experimental films and commercial porn. The limitations of such a politics became more apparent once its victories of free expression were won, and the emergence of the women's movement proved how different (and overlapping) sexual liberation and women's liberation were. Though many filmmakers and their supporters held up the breaking of sexual taboos as an artistic banner throughout the 60s, the fervor for the forbidden, once one, abated, leaving behind the artistic romanticism that always rested at its foundation.

On the West Coast, meanwhile, a more Rousseauvian romanticism was flourishing. James Broughton celebrated sexual innocence in films of lyric love in the 50s and more explicit eroticism in the 60s. With San Francisco as the center of the booming counter-culture, independent filmmaking turned psychedelic, while the freedom of the drug vision was expressed increasingly as a loosening of sexual restraints. Consider this typical description from the 1967 *Canyon Cinema* catalogue: "The Psychedelics: abstractions of reality using psychedelic patterns projected onto nude female bodies." Not all California filmmaking was psychedelic. There was also an attention to social satire, particularly in the work of Bruce Conner and Robert Nelson. Conner assembled found footage into dark comedies of society viewed askew, as in *Report*, which exposed the

Kennedy assassination as a media event. In 1965, Nelson's *o dem watermelons* (a counter-culture remake of *entr'acte*) accompanied the San Francisco Mime Troupe on its pro-civil rights tour of the country, making it probably one of the most politically effective experimental films of the time. It was a limited politics. Screenings today require an explanation of how its whacky slapstick against watermelons actually could symbolize American' racism.

Some avant garde filmmakers were able to make effective political films in the mid-60s by functioning as chroniclers, in their own style, of political events: for example, Bruce Baillie's *Port Chicago Vigil* (1966), a diary film of a demonstration against the shipping of napalm to Vietnam. Or in 1967, in New York, the Week of Angry Arts got a number of artists and galleries to hold a sort of moratorium in which artist dedicated work to the anti-war effort (though the individual work was not necessarily overtly political). Some 60 filmmakers participated in shooting one to three minute films for the occasion, resulting in a mammoth 3 hour compilation film, *For Life, Against the War*, with contributions by artists such as Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Robert Breer, and Shirley Clarke. The majority of work produced during this period was anti-establishment, in film as in the other arts, though there was an already growing rift between the avant garde and left-political camps.

During the late 50s and early 60s, film culture included overt political discussions as a regular part of its film coverage, just as the new American cinema movement included a number of political numbers in its membership. While the avant garde and political people shared a common enemy, they shared no common perspective or strategy. Relations became strained during the 60s as the political filmmakers saw art as instrumental--using films to raise money, provide resources for organized social and political organizations, or as they objected to the personalities of the dominant avant garde figures. The split widened rapidly at the end of the decade.

IN THE STREETS/IN THE GALLERIES

Add somewhere--WWBM

New developments were brewing that would leave underground film in a centrist position. On the one hand the increase of anti-war activity, the student movement, and the emergence of a militant Black Power movement would lead to a new engaged cinema, and on the other hand

the experimental cinema moved closer to the modernist visual arts for its models, leading to a new “structural” cinema.

In 1967 the Pentagon demonstration marked the end of nonviolence as the leading tactic in the antiwar movement and brought together a new group of committed documentaries, who then formed Newsreel, the New Left filmmaking and distribution-exhibition group that flourished in New York and other cities for several years.⁶ Seeing themselves basically in an agitation and informational role, they were open to and influenced by fresh strategies such as the work of Cuba’s Santiago Alvarez. As with Alvarez and many other Third World radical filmmakers, the combination of limited resources, political enthusiasm, desire to communicate about topical issues, and eager audiences lead to films still notable for their vigor, immediacy, and fresh vision. In addition, a heavily Yippie influence⁷ in the early months of Newsreel made it open to a wide variety of artistic experimentation--an impulse reinforced by the accomplished editing style of Allan Siegel. It was a time when almost every news report mentioned new fighting in Vietnam, and new resistance at home--ghetto rebellions, farm worker’s unionizing, draft resistance, student activism, and many other expressions of change. It was a time when rock music appeared progressive by its very nature, and the counter-culture seemed to make everyone under 30 years old political by definition.

As Newsreel responded to events “in the streets,” the avant garde responded to events “in the galleries.” Annette Michelson set the terms of this new position in “Film and the Radical Aspiration” (1966) which began pessimistically:\

The history of Cinema is, like that of Revolution in our time, a chronicle of hopes and expectations, aroused and suspended, tested and deceived.⁸

Michelson consistently perceived radical formalism as the only possible political and aesthetic stance for filmmakers. Indeed, in summing up the status quo later in the article, she wrote:

In a country whose power and affluence are maintained by the dialectic of a war economy, in a country whose drama of revolution has been sublimated in reforms, and frustrated by an equivocal prosperity, cinematic radicalism is condemned to a politics and strategy of social and aesthetic subversion.⁹

⁶ Nichols

⁷ define yippie

⁸ Michelson

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Thus independent film turns from the material process of life to the materiality of cinema, films investigation of its own filmic properties (grain, strobe effect, focus, etc.). Andy Warhol--a successful Pop Art painter and celebrity turned filmmaker--marked a turning point when he received the 1964 Film Culture award for his minimalist films *Sleep*, *Kiss*, *Eat*, *Haircut*, and *Empire*. While Warhol's early work parallels the filmic tradition of breaking taboos, his recognition by Film culture is for a new phase of his work which can be seen to usher in a new style of filmmaking derived less from Pop and mass art and more from the minimalist phase beginning to be heralded by critics and avant garde galleries. the post-modernist canons of the art world at this time (with emphasis on process art, minimalism, performance, and conceptual art) exercise a powerful influence on this generation of filmmakers: for example, Tony Conrad, *The Flicker*, 1966, Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967, Ken Jacobs, *Tom, tom, The Piper's Son*, 1969.

The Seventies Orthodoxy

In 1970 Gene Youngblood's book, *Expanded Cinema*, promised an Aquarian democratization of the media, expanding from the West Coast to topple the exclusive media hierarchies nationwide not with just new forms, but whole new technologies: video, computers, generational systems, lasers and other exotic hardwares. AS it turned out, the promise wasn't kept.

Once again New York city is the cultural point of origin (as it had been for film in the Beat era and with the publication of P. Adams Sitney's "Structural Film" essay (1969) its structural filmmakers became the new orthodoxy, serviced by a new cultural establishment.

The consolidation of the decade began with the opening, in 1970, of the Anthology Film Archives, founded by five men (including Mekas and Sitney), funded by their friend Jerome Hill, and structured to accommodate only the work of their own taste--even to the extent of the famous "invisible cinema," which made only a certain kind of film look good.¹⁰ they developed critical power: Mekas continued his persuasive Village Voice columns, he and Sitney continued to publish *Film Culture*, and Michelson was by now the film and performance editor of *Artforum*, the leading publication on new art, as well as editor of film books for Praeger, a major intellectual press. both Michelson and Sitney were teaching at New York University, where in their classes the Anthology collection was the standard of excellence. Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974) remains the most scholarly and therefore most influential book on avant garde cinema. Its concluding chapter, while more critical towards its subject than the historical chapters, effectively canonized its ultimate hierarchy of Snow, Sharits, Landow, Frampton, and Gehr. NYU trained

students further immortalized the same hierarchy in their critical essays commissioned for the Whitney Museum's *History of the American 'Avant-grade Cinema* catalogue, which was attacked upon its publication in 1976 by Vogel and others precisely for replicating this same narrow range.

Anthology and the New York University Press formalized this partnership with the publication of a series of books, notably Sitney's anthology on Anthology, *The Essential Cinema* (1975) which collected essays on, again, the films in the collection. In the area of exhibition, the chosen filmmakers fame was spread throughout the US by a new 70s network of Regional Film centers mandated to devote a portion of their programming to the New American Cinema. with reputations thus buoyed by publication and exhibition, most of these filmmakers secured positions in the numerous filmmaking departments organized in art schools and universities during the 1970s. Exhibitions abroad, like Michelson's 1974 Montreaux festival (which widened the spectrum to include Yvonne Rainer), and acquisitions, like the Pompidou Center's purchase of the entire Anthology collection of titles, have carried this orthodox legacy beyond the US borders. Thus the brave young challengers whose quest to break way and defy authority opened the decade of the 60s have, by the end of the 1970s become the comfortable establishment, themselves susceptible to a new challenge.¹¹

As the 70s witnessed the playing out of many traditions begun in the 60s, they have also seen the emergence of a totally new cinematic movements, particularly in films inspired by the feminist movement and minority struggles. within the established avant garde in the 70s three parallel developments were seen. One trend was "more of the same": the continuing work of the new American Cinema and structuralist filmmakers essentially along the same lines established in the 60s as well as a generation of younger filmmakers--often their students--following their lead.

A second trend, sometimes originating with the first, was a new academicism which exemplifies its self-referential aspect by examining not merely the materiality of film but all the material of the film/art world, with films that end up quoting from other avant garde films, filmmakers, and critics. There is a consequent upping of the ante in terms of those who can understand the work, frequently requiring an intimate knowledge of past films in order to catch the quotes. For example, George Landow's *Wide Angle Saxon* makes a number of witty jokes with punch lines depending on you recognition of some half-dozen major works of avant garde cinema. His later *New Improved Institutional Quality* depends both on your knowledge of its namesake and a passing acquaintance with the

genre categories in *Visionary Film*. In Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew* a recognition of who the various actors are (the cast includes Michelson, Sitney, and video artist Nam June Paik) and a knowledge of their positions in the art/film world are both necessary for an appreciation of the film's fundamental ironies. In Jim Benning's *Grand Opera* an even greater background is required: the identification of four filmmakers, their pseudonyms and their styles, one filmmaker's voice, and several past works by Benning are all compulsory if the film is to make any sense. These works seem to demand a cadre of professional explainers--sometime the filmmaker through statements or interviews, but often a generation of younger critics whose program notes, reviews in the art press and essays in *Film Culture* and *Millennium* deciphered the cinematic hieroglyphics and in-group jokes.

Whereas in the late 50s a general sympathy with bohemian ideas and ideals granted an access to avant garde films (via jazz, little magazine literature, life styles, etc.), by the late 60s the structuralist films depended on an audience schooled in specific art world concerns. The virtue of this style was its ability to compress and condense theoretical points, with, etc., to provide an added tension to its narrowing of target. Now, the new academicism of the late 70s depends on a knowledge of key avant garde films and celebrities. Thus a trajectory can be traced along a rate of decreasing accessibility, reducing the early avant garde promise of democratization down to a very intimate privileged inner circle. As Stan Brakhage once remarked regarding structural films, one problem with them was that they were so easy to fake. that is, once you know the formula you can turn them out without exploring further.

In a parallel, but not unrelated development, a number of filmmakers have returned to investigating narrative concerns and techniques using trained actors, synch sound, recognizable plots, and impressive sets. While some of these narrative filmmakers will be discussed elsewhere below, Mark Rapaport is perhaps the best example of someone wholly--and early on--committed to the New Narrative, with 5 feature films produced during the 70s. He represents the high class style of the New Narrative, while the cruder beginnings of the form back in the mid-60s are now being revived by a new generation of post-punk filmmakers based, once again, in New York.

The notion of an avant garde cinema which is both formally and politically radical is based in an idealist sentiment in the US--a wishful hypothesis rather lacking in illustration, for reasons which should be clear by the end of this article. The few filmmakers committed to this area remain isolated cases, often taken up in Europe where the model has more of a history and constituency, but still an aberration from both the political and avant garde mainstems of the US in the 80s.

However, the culture wars of the 80s did have some impact, as established avant gardists became politicized by events, esp. government attacks on artistic expression in terms of funding issues of NEA and NEH. (Bolton)

Some individuals established themselves first in traditional avant garde terms before making films with a heavy political influence: Jon Jost, Canadian Joyce Weiland, English emigré Anthony McCall (working in the late 70s with Andrew Tyndall, and then a collective). Weiland, who worked in New York before returning to Canada (as did Snow), maintained her structuralist origins in *Rat Life and diet in North America* (1968), a comic evocation of Canadian nationalism, while *Pierre Vallières* (1972) presents a single shot, synch sound extreme close up of the québécois separatist leader's lips giving a militant speech, and *Solidarity* (1973) a visual record of mass labor rally (heard on the sound track) showing only the feet of the demonstrators. Later she turned from avant garde strategies and moved into the traditional feature form for exploring nationalist history through stylized domestic melodrama in *The Far shore* (1976). Jost, the most Godardian US filmmaker in the 70s and 80s, explores the situations and dilemmas of the counterculture and the left (1,2,3,4 and the autobiographical *Speaking directly*. Committed to his own version of low budget feature length films, his more recent work has used narrative and reworking of genre conventions.

Anthony McCall has moved from installation art to formalist exploration of the cinematic apparatus with his Cone Series, which, following in the footsteps of Wavelength took the ultimate avant garde showcase, Belgium's Knokke festival, by storm in 74-75. Subsequently, in collaboration with Brit graphic designer Andrew Tyndall, McCall produced the resolutely didactic *Arguments* (197) which they see as a "theoretical intervention" into the reigning mindset of the New York art world, but which contradicts in its effect, its own intentions when it embraces authoritarian intellectual terrorism as an aesthetic strategy. Later the pair joined Jane Weinstock andto produce the highly theoretical *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, an examination and deconstruction of the famous case study from a post-structuralist perspective.

In the early 70s Yvonne Rainer completed *Journeys From Berlin/1971* which offers a synthesis encompassing autobiography, psychoanalysis, domestic conversation, and a discussion of terrorism, through a variety of formal strategies. While holding to a commitment to and expansion of formal style (including fixed camera, narrative displacements, irony, stream of consciousness progressions, etc.) and to move beyond simple ambiguity, Rainer offered an example of how avant garde film could move into a new and potentially fruitful area. At the same time, Rainer's early films often seem deeply embedded in art world "ways of seeing"

and “ways of presenting” subject matter with political themes, thus virtually demanding an audience steeped in these ways of perceiving and ways of receiving to get the full effect.

The exception that proves the rules of the game; the token as breakthrough

One notion that developed in the 1970s was the supposed breakthrough of leftists into feature documentary, and more recently the fiction category that can win exposure through certain film festivals and can lay short runs in art house theaters in select urban areas or college towns. Indeed there has long been a market for one or two feature documentaries each year in the US exhibition pattern. Starting with Emile de Antonio’s *Point of Order* (on Senator Joe McCarthy), *In the Year of the Pig* (Vietnam), *Millhouse* (Richard Nixon), etc. and with Marcel Ophüls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity* that space was opened up for independents and remained open, at the same level, ever since. The documentaries that fill the slot may be of any type--apolitical, like *Pumping Iron* (bodybuilding), silent in avoiding politics like *Gimme Shelter* (on the Rolling Stones tour that included the Altamont concert where Hell’s Angels killed a spectator, muckraking-exploitive like *Marjoe* (biopic of a cynical revivalist preacher) or dealing with a political subject in a nonpolitical way, like *Idi Amin Dada* (a sensationalist portrait of the _____ dictator). But in the 1970s these became a bonus slot for progressive filmmakers with promotional know-how. Sometimes their films were self-distributed and self-promoted such as Jerry Bruck’s *I. F. Stone* (on the dissident left journalist), Jill Godmillow’s *Antonia* (on a pioneering female musical conductor excluded from prestige by classical music sexism), the Mariposa Collective’s *Word is Out* (on gay and lesbian presence). Occasionally a film can use festival success to transfer at this stage to a major distributor, such as Barbara Kopple with *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (on Kentucky miners on strike) thereby attaining commercial theater exposure without the personal burden of crossing the country via the local talk-show circuit to build an audience

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